



‘Difference is not something to overcome but to build from’: the importance of intercultural sensitivity training for PGR supervisors.

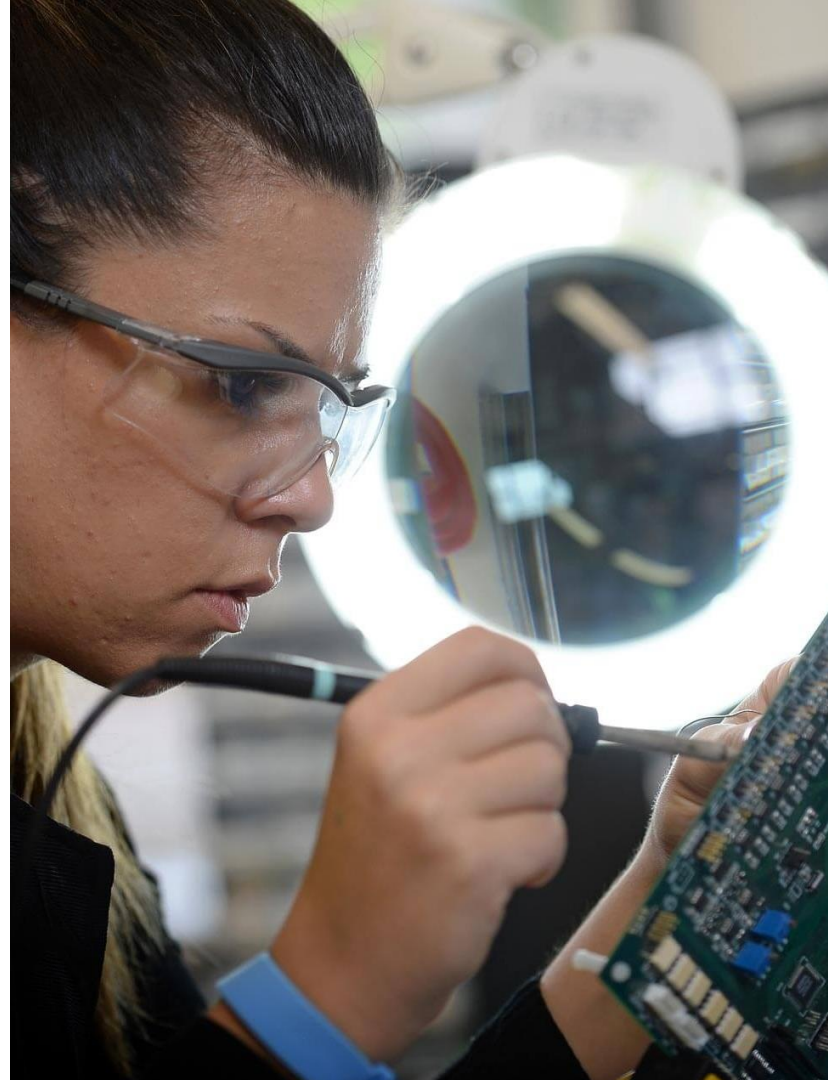


Dr Malgorzata (Gosia) Drewniok



Outline

- Introduction
 - Who am I?
 - Why this focus is important?
- The workshop
- Cultural Intelligence (CQ)
- Conclusion: why does it matter?





01

Introduction

Who am I?

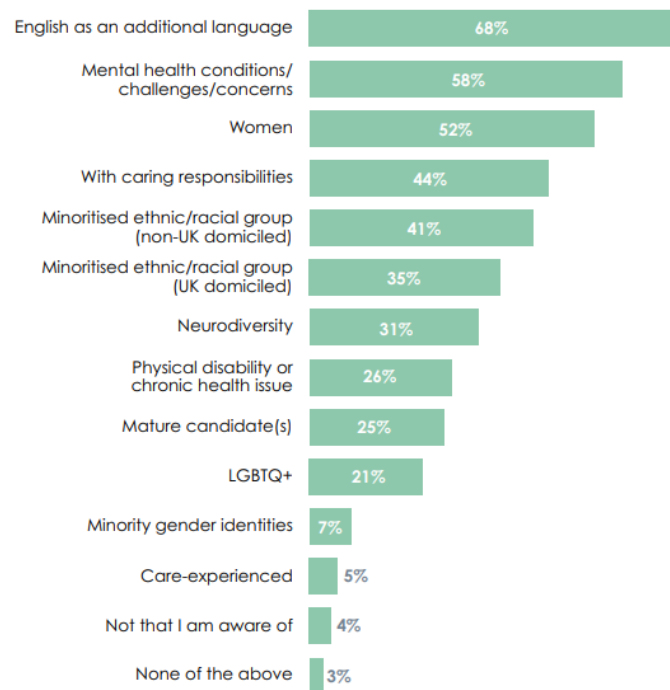
- Assistant Director for International Student Success
- Former international PGR – PhD in Linguistics (2014, Lancaster)
- Speaker of English as a second language
- Experienced educator focused on international students
- Running workshops for international PGRs and supervisors since 2019
- Actively involved in Doctoral Education SIG (BALEAP) since the start of the SIG, and working on a co-edited volume as one of the editors
- Certified CQ (Cultural Intelligence) Facilitator



Why talk about intercultural sensitivity in supervision?

- Numbers of international PGRs in the UK are steadily growing – in 2024-25, there were around 50,000 international doctoral students (HESA).
- More and more of supervisors are international colleagues too.
- A significant proportion of supervisors don't feel they have intercultural skills necessary for supervising – UK Research Supervision Survey, 33%* in 2021 and 21% in 2024.
- Many supervisors work with students using English as an additional language and/or come from minoritised ethnic/racial group (UK Research Supervision Survey 2024)
- Building intercultural sensitivity and cultural intelligence helps us work with people from different cultural backgrounds (not just international).

Characteristics of doctoral candidates





02

The workshop

‘Supervising international PGRs’ – workshop

- In collaboration with the Bristol Doctoral College
- Introduced in 2025-26
- Part of the wider Supervisor Development Framework – a suite of compulsory and optional training opportunities
- Based on previous workshops I ran at University of Lincoln 2019-2024
- Includes an introduction to Cultural Intelligence (CQ)
- 2025-26 – 3 x in-person workshops, 90 min each
- 2026-27 – 3 x workshops, 1 online and 2 in person
- Open to all supervisors, across faculties – but opportunities in the future to run more tailored sessions (e.g. one for School of Dentistry in Sept 2026 already booked).

Workshop objectives:

- Improving one’s awareness of potential intercultural tensions or misunderstandings students and supervisors might face, and how they can learn from each other
- Learning from the experience of those working with international students on a daily basis, and those who have been international PhD students themselves
- Sharing experience and strategies with colleagues and learning from them

‘Supervising international PGRs’ workshop

What do I currently cover?

- PGRs at Bristol (numbers and characteristics)
- UK Supervisory Surveys 2021 and 2024
- Supervisory frameworks
- Challenges international PGRs face
- Intercultural awareness and introduction to Cultural Intelligence (CQ)
- Student scenarios – group activity
- Final tips

This includes ongoing conversation, with participants able to share their thoughts and practice, and raise questions – allowing people to learn from each other.



03

Cultural Intelligence (CQ)



The need for intercultural sensitivity

'In order to assist international research students to triumph over the culturally embedded challenges in thesis writing, it is important for the supervisors to understand international research students' unique pedagogical needs and develop intercultural sensitivity in their pedagogical practice in postgraduate research supervision.'

(Wang and Li 2008)





What is Cultural Intelligence (CQ)?



Cultural Intelligence (CQ[®]) is the capability to relate and work effectively in situations where people have different cultural backgrounds. Research on Cultural Intelligence, which to date spans over 150 countries and more than 250,000 individuals, demonstrates those with Cultural Intelligence have four key capabilities:



Behavioural preferences

Understanding differences in individual behavioral preferences provides important insights into the way we view the world, how we communicate, our relationships, and our approach to work. Behavioral preferences are descriptive. It is not better to be at one end of the continuum or the other. It also is not better to be in the middle. Instead, understanding behavioral preferences gives us neutral terms to describe ways people we work with are similar and ways they are different.

Note – preferences reveal:

- General orientation to life, work, and relationships
- Potential biases toward those with different behavioural preferences
- They do not predict your ability to work effectively across cultures

Behavioural preferences

Low Context/Direct	Emphasis on explicit communication (words)
High Context/Indirect	Emphasis on indirect communication (tone, context)
Being	Emphasis on having contemplative time and relationship building
Doing	Emphasis on being busy and meeting goals
Universalism	Emphasis on rules; standards that apply to everyone
Particularism	Emphasis on specifics; unique standards based on relationships
Non-Expressive/Neutral	Emphasis on non-emotional communication; hiding feelings
Expressive/Affective	Emphasis on expressive communication; sharing feelings
Monochronic	Emphasis on one thing at a time; punctuality
Polychronic	Emphasis on multitasking; interruptions ok

Behavioural preferences

Individualism	Emphasis on individual goals and individual rights
Collectivism	Emphasis on group goals and personal relationships
Lower Power Distance	Emphasis on equality; shared decision-making
High Power Distance	Emphasis on differences in status; superiors make decisions
Low Uncertainty Avoidance	Emphasis on flexibility and adaptability
High Uncertainty Avoidance	Emphasis on planning and predictability
Cooperative	Emphasis on collaboration, nurturing, and family
Competitive	Emphasis on competition, assertiveness, and achievement
Short-Term Time Orientation	Emphasis on immediate outcomes (success now)
Long-Term Time Orientation	Emphasis on long-term planning (success later)

Example student scenarios from the workshop

Scenario A

Student A has 3 supervisors, two from their school and one from a different school at the same university. Most supervisory meetings take place between the 4 people (student + 3 supervisors), but sometimes Student A meets each supervisor individually. This often confuses them as each supervisor tells them something different. When they try to use this feedback, the other supervisors say they should do something different.

Scenario B

Student B has the same supervisor as Student C and they often talk about their experience. Recently, Student B has become worried – the other student seems to be very friendly with their supervisor, whereas Student B's meetings with them are more formal, more teacher-student.

What factors affect PGRs' satisfaction with their supervisor?

'The quality of the relationship between a student and her/his supervisor is not dependent uniquely on the characteristics – or efforts – of either the student or the supervisor. Arguably, this depends both on the traits of the supervisor and of the student, the context in which they are embedded, and the interactions through which they develop a relationship.'

(Seeber and Horta 2012: 4)

→ Different cultural backgrounds could impact this relationship

BUT

'A key finding is that satisfaction is not pre-determined by major demographic of the student, the supervisor nor their interaction.'

(ibid. 14)



04

Why does it matter?

The invisible others – why international PGRs drop out (Laufer and Gorup 2018)

Study of international doctoral students at a Western European university

Four types of Othering:

1. Foreign – status as a foreigner / overseas student
2. Academic – being academic novices
3. Financial – ‘precarious financial situation related to receiving short-term contracts, external funding, and financial dependency on their supervisor’
4. Social – feelings of isolation or exclusion

What do we learn from student surveys? (ISB 2024 and PRES 2025)

- Supervisory relationship very important (positive relationship – supportive, approachable, BUT: need for managing expectations to avoid misunderstanding)
- Supervisor availability important – ‘The single most important predictor of personal and professional satisfaction with supervision is how frequently the student meets the supervisor’ (Seeber and Horta 2021: 13)
- Culture – supportive, but sometimes need for more support navigating new context
- Sense of belonging important (therefore it’s key to understand the students’ context)

Academic hospitality (Ploner 2018) and culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay 2002, Hollie 2017) helpful here. And the first step is developing intercultural sensitivity.



The need for intercultural training

- New supervisors are typically required to attend some compulsory training, but often it centres around regulations, with less focus on pastoral care.
- Challenges faced by the international students might be covered, but usually just about issues such as funding or visa issues.
- With PGR studies becoming more and more culturally diverse, both among supervisors and students, it is important we build intercultural sensitivity and understanding.
- Research shows that one of the main reasons for international PGRs to drop out of their programme is feeling othered. Moving away from deficit approach and instead building cultural intelligence can help counter that.



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Thank you ● ● ●

Do you have any questions?

Get in touch: gosia.drewniok@bristol.ac.uk

Find me on LinkedIn:

